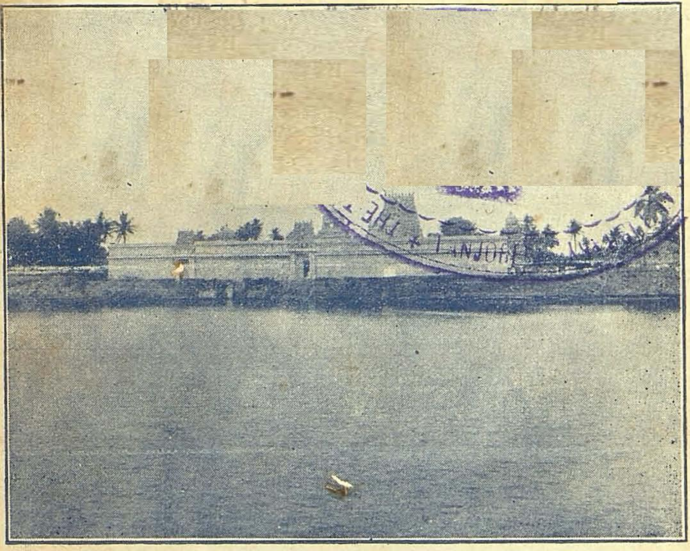
THE SIKKAL TEMPLE



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Sri Navaneethesvarar Devasthanam

SIKKAL.

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PREFACE

This brochure on the Sikkal temple has been compiled in response to a circular and issued by the Hindu Religious Endowments Board Madras, at the instance of Sri Rao Bahadur C. M. Ramachandran Chettiar B.A.,B.L., F. R. G S., the divisional Commissioner of the Board, and under the patronage of Sri Diwan Bahadur T. M. Narayanaswamy Pillai M.A., B.L., the President of the Board. It is written by Sri K. M. Narasimham B.Sc., F. R. E. S, M.R.A.S., F. R. H. S. (Lond.) the managing officer appointed by the Board for Sri Navaneethesvarar Devasthanam, and is published in the hope that this booklet will be of some guidance to the pilgrims visiting the Sikkal temple.

The Sikkal Temple

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Topography

Secluded from the din and bustle of busy Negapatam (a port town on the east coast of South India) and serenely rising with its stately towers amidst cool and green paddy-fields, is the neat little Sikkal temple with its hoary antiquity and decorative architecture. Sikkal can pass for a suburban extension of Negapatam town, and it lies in the coastal Negapatam Taluk of the fertile Tanjore District—fertile with its endless paddy fields ponds and palm-groves, and whose fertility it is that has enticed the Mahratta invader from his far-off home on the west-coast. It is served by a railway station named with a little mutilation as Sikkal, lying on the Tanjore—Nagore branch of the main line of the South Indian Railway. The temple is just two furlongs from the Railway station and barely a furlong from the Tanjore-Negapatam motor road where buses ply hour to hour. The pilgrims and tourists are always welcome for a

short stay at Sikkal in the several convenient stay-houses owned between the Devasthanam and its Nagarathar donors ; and there are three public choultries too. Sikkal has a population numbering about three-thousand, mainly consisting of Sengunthars primarily subsisting on the weaving industry which had been thriving in Sikkal since several centuries. There is a good sprinkling of other communities as well, such as Vellalas, Yadavas, Brahmins, Harijans and others.

Temple

Now to a description of the temple. On the bank of the beautiful square lake, by name *Ksheerapushkarani* or *Palkulam* rises the four stately temple walls enclosing within its holy square, the twin temples of Siva and Vishnu situate in such a close proximity as is seldom seen in our land. The Siva temple of Navaneethesverar and the Vishnu temple of Kolavamana perumal are lying side by side within one and the same *prakaram* as though to set at rest the bigoted controversy—that the deities named Siva and Vishnu, claimed as different by differing religious wranglers of the diverse cults of Saivism and Vaishnavism, are after all only different names and forms of that one and only divinity that exists, that one divinity, that,

"One God, one law, one element,
One far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves."—Tennyson.

Temple-parts and deities

Entering by the eastern gate of the temple and passing under the majestic *Raja gopuram* the visitor gets into the beautifully decorated and tastefully painted Krithigai mandapam, which is the hall of Krithigai dharsan, whereto Singaravelavar (son of Siva) moves out from his permanent seat inside, on every Krithigai day of the month for *dharsan* to its vast number of devotees, who gather to pay their homage from a radius of several miles. The ceiling of the hall is artfully painted with a series of scenes drawn from the epic *Skanthapuranam*. Passing in from this hall the visitor gets into the *sannathi* of Sakthiyayathatchi (alias Velnedunkanni) the consort of Siva, who derives her name from the resemblence of her long beautiful eyes to the beautiful weapon—' Vel '. Proceeding further in and up a flight of steps, the visitor gets into the *Sannithanam* of Singaravelavar (Subramanyaswami), whose name is derived from the beauty and splendour of his form. It is really

a luminous form with a unique charm, and many a devotee come for *dharsan* lingers long under the spell of its mute eloquence. Going further in, the visitor gets into the sanctum sanctorium of the shrine, and stands in the holy *sannithanam* of Sri Navaneethesvarar—in a *sannithanam* where had stood many a saint and many a king praying in penance for atonement of their sins, and their sins were atoned by His divine grace! Sri Navaneethesvarar is the presiding deity of the shrine and is named so as this **lingam** or image of Siva (Easwar) was installed centuries ago by saint Vasishta, who moulded it out of butter (*Navaneetham*) derived from the milk of the divine cow—Kamathenu. And hence the deity is otherwise called Palvennainathar or Vennailingesvarar.

Situate by the side of the Siva temple towards the north lies the Vishnu temple, where the presiding deity is called Kolavamana perumal, as it is at Sikkal that Vishnu before taking the Vamanavathara Kolam, (the dwarf-form) came to worship Siva. The consort of Kolavamana perumal is called here Komalavalli thayar.

When and how built

The Sikkal temple was in existence since several centuries as is proved in the succeeding pages. The building of this shrine of Navaneethesvarar is attributed first to an ancient king of Ayodhya by name Musugundha chakravarthy, as is related in the Sikkal *sthala puranam* preserved in palmyrah leaf-records in the Sarasvathi Mahal library of Tanjore—one of the most ancient and oriental libraries of India. In gratitude to the divine grace of Navaneethesvarar who cured him of his ills, the king built this temple on a grand scale with beautiful mantapams, five *prakarams*, lofty towers, and also made valuable vahanams and costly jewellery. Poetic records relate that it was next renovated and rebuilt by Kochchengannan, a chola king, in the fourth century. Some repairs aud renovations seem to have been done now and then, but the latest and grandest renovation was done and completed 6 years ago by the late Sri Karumuthu Alagappa Chettiar of Athikkadu Thekkur, Ramnad District who was the distinguished trustee of the temple from 1889 to 1934. It is due to his generous donations that we find the temple now in its neat-built up-to-date and admirable form, with gold-plated vahanams and attractive set of valuable jewels.

The *Sthala viriksham* (sacred tree) of Sikkal is the holy Jasmine tree under which it is that Saint Vasishta installed centuries ago the Navaneetha *lingam*. And the *sthala theertham* (sacred tank) of Sikkal is the sacrosanct tank of *Ksheerapushkarani* which awaits to give you a refreshing and sacred bath.

Sacred tree and tank

Besides the main temple enshrining Sri Navaneethesvarar, Singaravelavar and Kolavamana perumal, there are eight other sub-temples, which are comparatively small and of minor importance. They comprise the Pidari koil in front of the main temple, Apaththukkaththa Ayyanar Koil in the street south of the main temple, Mariamman koil in the street west of it, and Thodipillayar koil in the east street. The remaining temples of Sri Kailasanathaswami, Ayyanar, Mari, Maistri thiruvasal are all situate in the Sellur village belonging to the temple.

Sub-temples

The architectural beauty of the main temple, are sure to interest a visitor of refined taste. The majestic gopurams with their artful sculptural work, the artistic paintings of puranic stories on the ceilings of mantapams, the

Attractive features

picturesque colour-work tastefully decorating the walls within, the beautiful and bountiful set of lights flooding the entire space inside the temple with its lustrous brilliance, the impressive and inspiring form of Singaravelar and of other deities holding everyone under a spell of reverence, and above all the godly cleanliness and the solemn sanctity pervading the entire atmosphere inside the temple,—have certainly an appeal for every thoughtful pilgrim, an appeal that commands reverence and devotion of him, an appeal that makes him forget a while the cares and worries of this fickle world. The four gold-plated vahanams and vahanams plated with silver will prove on sight to be eloquent products of a rare art. And the valuable galaxy of costly jewellery and other paraphernalia in silver and gold, is certainly a possession of pride to the Devasthanam.

Now to a short account of the myths and traditions pertaining to Sikkal and its shrines. Sikkal in the puranic records is originally referred to as Devasannithiapuram as it was the resort of Devas, and also called Malligaranyam due to the abundance of jasmine groves. Kamathenu the divine cow of Mount Kailas, during its rambles on the earth at a

Puranic traditions: Sivatemple.

faminestricken time, finding nothing to appease its hunger-pinch, ate at last the flesh of a dead dog. And for this crime of eating flesh, Siva cursed the cow to get deformed into a tiger and to roam on the earth eating flesh and flesh alone. Appalled at its instantaneous deformation into a detestable tiger, Kamathenu entreated Siva for pardon, whereon Siva said that Kamathenu would regain its original form as a cow on reaching Devasannithiapuram on the earth, where it was ordained to live a life of piety till He himself appeared there and relieved it of the curse. Under the spell of the curse Kamathenu roamed as a loathsome tiger on the earth. On reaching Devasannithiapuram and bathing in the tank 'Amirthathatakam,' it regained its original cow form and spent its days in piety roaming in the jasmine groves. Kamathenu filled the tank Amirthathatakam with its divine milk, and hence the tank got the name *Palkulam* or *Ksheerapushkarani* (tank of milk). Some time after, Saint Vasishta went to Lord Siva to pray for possession of Kamathenu to utilise its services for his Yagas, and Lord Siva directed the Saint to go to Devasannithiapuram and do *thapas* there to attain his object. Accordingly Vasishta came to Devasannithiapuram, made a *Lingam* (an image of Siva) out of butter derived from

the milk of Kamathenu, installed the *Lingam* on the banks of *Cheerapushkarani*, and performed *thapas.* Pleased over the fervency of his *thapas*, Lord Siva appeared in person before the Saint Vasishta, presented to him the divine Kamathenu relieving the cow from its curse. As prayed for by Vasishta, Siva invested the sacred *Lingam* with the power of curing all the evils and ills of those who worship it, and finally merged into the *Lingam* and vanished therein. Thereafter the *Lingam*, came to be known as Palvennainathar or Navaneethesvarar, and the place came to be called Sikkal as it was here that Lord Siva got himself caught up (சிக்கிணர்) in the *Lingam* into which he merged and mingled.

Sanctity

The power invested with the deity here of curing the ills and evils of those who worship it, have been amply manifested in instance after instance. Musugunthan the King of Ayodhya, tormented by the sin of having killed a brahmin unwittingly during his hunt, got his cure only on coming to Sikkal and on worship

of Navaneethesvarar. And in grateful devotion Musuguntan built this temple and commenced the Chitra Festival. Further the famous saint Agasthiar also resorted to the feet of Navaneethesvarar, for redemption from the sin of his having killed the two demons, Vathabi and Vilvalan. And it is here again that Saint Visvamithra resorted to and regained by penance his strength of *thapas* lost in flirtation with his angelic love—Thilothama sent by God Indra to interrupt his *thapas.* Puranas relate a long list of saints and sages, Naratha Karthikeyana and others, who resorted to the feet of Navaneethesvarar at Sikkal for relief from their troubles and tribulations.

Puranic: Subramania Temple

The consort of Siva (Navaneethesvarar) is worshipped here by the name Sakthiyayathatchi or Velnedunkanni. It is here that Sakthiyayathatchi presented her son Subramania with the famous *Velayutham* with which weapon Subramanya performs the remarkable feat of annihilation of the invincible demon, Pathmasuran. And it is this annihilation that is commemorated as Skandasashti festival every year in the Tamil month of Ayppasi.

Puranic : Vishnu Temple

As regards the deity Sri Kolavamana perumal, enshrined in the adjoining sub-temple of Vishnu, the mythological accounts are few in detail. The only reference in Sikkal *Sthalapuranam* is that Vishnu came to worship Siva at Sikkal. The puranic record—Seshadharmam, throws light on the object of worship. In as much as Mahabali was a devout devotee of Siva, Vishnu sought for the blessings of Siva, in his worship here, prior to subduing such a devotee by taking the incarnate form of Vamanavatharam.

Historical account: Siva Temple

Next we proceed to a historical account of Sikkal and its shrines as authentically established from old records, literary works and epigraphs. The existence of this shrine sixteen centuries ago is brought to light by the fact that this temple was renovated by the Chola King Kochchengannan (alias Silanthi Cholan), who lived in the second half of the fourth century.' A reference to this renovation by this royal devotee is recorded in the works of Thirumangai Alwar a Vaishnavaite saint who flourished in the eighth century A.D.

The importance attached to the Sikkal Navaneethesvarar temple even about 1,300 years ago stands on record in the songs sung by **Thirugnana Sambanthar** the Saivite missionary poet of South India who lived in the middle of the seventh century. He has sung in praise of the sanctity of the Sikkal shrine in eleven beautiful poems compiled in **Thevaram.** The fact of Tirugnana Sambanthar's visit to Sikkal is recorded three centuries later in Periyapuranam written by Sekkilar who lived in the tenth century.

Next in the chronological order of the references about the Sikkal shrine, is an inscription on the west base of the shrine (recorded in 1911 by the Department of Epigraphy as no. 107). It states that a Pandya King of Madura by name Veera Pandya Deva, gave a gift of money to Sri Navaneethesvarar temple in the tenth year of his reign. This inscription should have been written 7 centuries ago as the donor the Pandya King lived in the 13th century. So we see that this temple was famous enough to attract a royal donor living

far south, even seven hundred years ago. That the fame of the temple extended not only to the south but also to the north and attracted royal devotees, is evidenced in a record written 400 years ago. This is an inscription engraved on the south base of the shrine of Navaneethesvarar dated 1563 A.D., which registers a royal gift of land endowments from Krishnamarasayya—a ruling chieftain under the Vijayanagar Emperor by name Sadasiva Maharayar.

Historical: Subramania Temple

Subramania Swami (Singaravelavar) at Sikkal, which is the most popular deity of Sikkal to-day, was also popular even in the 16th century and attracted royal gifts. This fact is evidenced in an inscription on the west base of the shrine of Navaneethesvarar, dated 1530 A.D., which registers a munificent gift of gold coins given to the deity of Subramania Swamy (Singaravelavar) by an emperor of Vijayanagar named Achuthappa Maharaja. The popularity of Sikkal Singaravelavar about five or six centuries ago comes to further evidence, from the two Thirupugal poems sung by Saint **Arunagirinathar**, who lived in the fifteenth century.

Historical: Vishnu Temple

The Vishnu temple of Sri Kolavamana Perumal was also important and popular on those days of the fifteenth century, and attracted endowments and donations. This is evident from an inscription dated 1447 A.D., carved on the South wall of the central shrine of Kolavamana perumal temple, which records an endowment of lands granted by Dakshina Dandanayakkar the military chieftain under the Vijayanagar King, Sri Malligarjuna Maharaja. There is another inscription on the west base of the same shrine registering a Kattalai from one Aiyya Pillai, a wealthy inhabitant of Sikkal.

All these epigraphical records and historical accounts invest the Sikkal temple with a hoary antiquity, and show that the temple was not ushered into existence in recent times, but was in existence and popularity since many centuries.

Finances and Gifts

The finances of Sikkal Devasthanam are sound, and its income amounts nearly to Rs. 30,000 per annum. The Devasthanam owns an agricultural estate of an extent about 1140 acres, besides several house properties. There is a well-built dairy maintaining a sufficient

stock of milch-cows to supply milk for the daily *abishekam* and the other usages in the temple, which is a gift of Sri A R. N. Arumugam Chettiar of Thekkur, in Ramnad district. A beautiful flower-garden (Nandavanam) and its maintenance for daily supply of flowers to the temple is a gift of Sri V. S. Ramanatham Chettiar of Pulankurichi, Ramnad district. The latest benefaction is from an young Nagarathar donor by name Sri S. Rm. N. N. Ramanathan Chettiar of Muthupattinam Ramnad district, whose donation has enabled the Devasthanam to build recently a religious school (Thevara Patasalai) intended to popularise the study of Saivite Literature. The Devasthanam is also subsidising a small native hospital for public welfare.

Festivals and Pujas

Among the festivals of the temple, the most important one is the annual Skandasashti Festival celebrated to commemorate the annihilation of the demon Surapathmasuran by Singaravelavar, and the wedding of Singaravelavar with Theivayanai and Valli. This festival is celebrated with great eclat, with select musical concerts and of late with a series of religious lectures too. This festival extending over one week in the tamil month of ***Ayppasi***

every year, is a source of attraction to thousands of pilgrims who come from as far south as Ramnad district. Next in importance is the Chitra Festival occuring once in a year in the Tamil month of *Chitra* (March—April). There are also monthly festivals of Krithigai *dharsan*, celebrated on the Krithigai day of every month, when the deity Singaravelavar is moved to the Krithigai *mandapam* of the temple where devotees from several miles around gather with offerings. Besides there are several other minor fesivals which are spread over the whole year round. The daily *puja* in the temple is performed five times a day, in the morning, noon, and in the evening, the fourth after dusk, and the fifth late in the night which brings the day's cycle of pujas to a close. *Archanas* can be performed by the temple priests for the paying pilgrims at the rate of an anna and a quarter for *Ashtothram* and at five annas for *Sahasranamam*.

Literature on Sikkal

As for the literature on Sikkal and its shrines, the earliest to be mentioned is of the seventh century. Thirugnana Sambanthar, the great saivite poet of South India has sung eleven beautiful songs in praise of the

sanctity of Navaneethesvarar, the presiding deity of the Sikkal shrine, and these songs are found compiled in the famous works called *Thevaram.* Later in about the fifteenth century, Sri Arunagirinathar, the tamil poet of Thiruppugal fame has sung two *Thiruppugal* songs exalting the glory of Singaravelavar—the most popular deity of Sikkal. The *Sikkal sthala puranam* is preserved in palmyrah leaf-records, in grantha script, in the Sarasvathi Mahal Library of Tanjore, one of the most ancient oriental libraries of India. The Sthalapuranam was translated into Tamil by a local scholar Sri Govindaswamy Pillai and was published as a book thirty four years ago but the publication is now out of print. The Devasthanam proposes to publish a tamil version of the Sthalapuranam shortly.

Management

The management of the Devasthanam is now carried on by an honorary Trustee (Sri Karumuthu Al. Arunachalam Chettiar) and a paid officer (Sri K. M. Narasimham B.sc., F.R.E.S., M.R.A.S., F.R.H.S. (Lond.,), both appointed by the Hindu Religious Endowments Board, under a scheme of administration settled for the Devasthanam in 1935 by the said Board; and both are

carrying on the administration of Devasthanam to the best of their lights. The management of the Devasthanam will feel immensely gratified, if by their humble services rendered through this institution, they have been able, even if it be in the smallest degree, to keep the **Sacred Lamp** of Hindu Religion and Spirituality burning high, despite the blasts and onslaughts of the materialistic west; and if,

"That lamp be the beacon-light
On the sea of life, where alas!
Man meets man, meets and parts again."

Mystic parrot

A few words more and this brochure closes. And that is for presenting to your attention the oldest devotee of our temple namely the temple-parrot, lest you should miss it, amidst your ambulations in the precincts of the temple. Parrots never live forty years, but the divine grace of Navaneethesvarar has enabled the parrot devotee to extend its life beyond forty years. And this mystic parrot has been repeating all these forty years to every visitor that has passed by its side, its kind and loud note of enquiry "Who you are?". And the parrot waits to greet you too with the same enquiry

" Who you are ?"—perhaps an enquiry that stimulates in you the philosophical chain of self-searching thoughts " Who you are ?" in this skin-bound existence "Whence and what for you came" and "whither you go,"—thus questioning the mystery that hangs over the identity, origin and destiny of your existence, and perhaps to remind you of the famous lines of Pope,

> "Man, know thyself, who you are
> All wisdom centres there."

Written by Sri. K. M. Narasimham B.Sc., F.R.E.S., M.R.A.S., F.R.H.S. (Lond.)
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